

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 465 990

CS 511 196

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TITLE Programmatic Interdisciplinarity.
PUB DATE 2002-03-21
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (53rd, Chicago, IL, March 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Discourse; *Anthologies; Definitions; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach
IDENTIFIERS Southern Connecticut State University; Ways of Reading (Bartholomae and Petrosky)

ABSTRACT

Commonly thought to mean "an essay for school," composition courses in colleges and universities aspire to teach first-year college students to write academic prose. For institutional purposes, composition classes are considered service courses, preparing students to write those kinds of papers they will be asked to write in their major courses. Instructors hired to teach composition at Southern Connecticut State University enter a department that, like many English departments housing this service course, defines composition as not literature and that, as a result, determined that non-literary texts must be used to teach these courses. So composition is conventionally taught with anthologies, most of which claim to be interdisciplinary. The editors of "Ways of Reading," for example, intentionally select essays that are too difficult for first-year college students to grasp, instructing them to work with those pieces of the essays that they understand. This guidance, however practical, undermines the text's potential usefulness as a tool to conceptualize interdisciplinary connections. This paper argues that interdisciplinarity is not accomplished by including essays representing more than one discipline on a table of contents--interdisciplinarity is a method for investigating systems of meaning as they are coded in language across discourses. The paper explains this method using a grammatical reference: conjunction. According to the paper, interdisciplinarity is a way of reading that asks students to identify a concept meaningfully deployed in more than one discipline, and to produce a text comprehensible to those disciplines under consideration. (NKA)

Programmatic Interdisciplinarity

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 Presented at the 4Cs
 Chicago, IL
 March 21st 2002

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I am going to begin my presentation in the way that many of us ask our students to begin their essays for our composition classes by defining some terms. First, composition. Commonly thought to mean "an essay for school," composition courses in colleges and universities aspire to teach first-year college students to write academic prose. For institutional purposes, composition classes are considered service courses, preparing students to write those kinds of papers they will be asked to write in their major courses. We were hired to perform this function, full-time, at SCSU. We entered a department that, prior to our hiring, like many English departments housing this service course, defined composition as not literature and that, as a result, determined that non-literary texts must be used to teach these courses. So composition has become as much about the institutional goals and the product of the course as it is about the content.

To satisfy institutional and departmental objectives, composition is conventionally taught with anthologies, most of which claim to be interdisciplinary. Technically, interdisciplinary means "between disciplines," that is, between conceptual vocabularies associated with particular academic discourses, represented at universities as departments. Interdisciplinary learning, then, concerns connectivity. Anthologies like *Ways of Reading*, the most popular composition anthology at SCSU, generally contain essays from a variety of disciplinary perspectives; they do not, however, guide students to think and write between disciplines. The editors of *Ways of Reading*, for example, intentionally select essays that are too difficult for first-year college students to grasp, instructing them to work with those pieces of the essays that they understand. This guidance, however reasonable and practical, undermines the text's potential usefulness as a tool to conceptualize interdisciplinary connections. In other words, composition

anthologies might appear interdisciplinary but don't necessarily function that way for students or for professors.

As someone who graduated from interdisciplinary undergraduate, masters and Ph.D programs, I will briefly argue here that interdisciplinarity isn't accomplished by including essays representing more than one discipline on a table of contents; interdisciplinarity is a method for investigating systems of meaning as they are coded in language across discourses. I will explain this method using a grammatical reference: conjunction. That linguistic form that produces connections between sentences, phrases, clauses or words, theorized as a means for creating intersections between categories of cultural products, constitutes interdisciplinarity. In other words, interdisciplinarity is a way of reading that asks students to identify a concept meaningfully deployed in more than one discipline, and to produce a text comprehensible to those disciplines under consideration.

Making connections, as discussed in *Ways of Reading* and demonstrated through questions at the end of essays or sections in this anthology and in others, concerns "how [students] might use one text as the context for interpreting another" (Bartholomae and Petrosky 17). Connections are generally construed as thematic and are inattentive to the disciplinary work that the essays actually perform. The introduction to *Ways of Reading* offers students the following example: Students can "consider different ways of ...writing about the past by looking at the work of two very different writers," John Edgar Wideman and Patricia Nelson Limerick (17). Although asking students to think in this way is not uninteresting and could empower them to write an essay for school, this kind of instruction doesn't provide students with the tools to understand why and in what ways

Wideman's and Limerick's essays are different and why and in what ways they collide. Essentially, it doesn't ask students to know anything at all about the disciplines in which these essays are embedded or with which they converse. It also doesn't ask students to examine the artificiality of disciplinary parameters as they are represented in writing both within and outside of that discipline or the ways in which an essay in one discipline performs disciplinary work by appropriating another disciplinary vocabulary or strategy of interpretation.

So why do anthology editors bring together essays from a variety of disciplines if they don't encourage students and professors to examine interdisciplinarity? Texts of this sort have become popular with administrators and professors, therefore with publishers, and are marketable for the following reasons. Interdisciplinary anthologies - especially those that contain no literary texts or only a small number - respond to English department policies limiting the use of literary texts in composition courses. As well, this kind of anthology is thought to appeal to a large number of students. Since composition students are usually first-year students who have not yet decided or, if they have decided, have not yet begun their major study, a diverse selection of readings insures that the majority of the students in a composition class will find at least one essay interesting. Finally, so-called interdisciplinary anthologies appeal to administrators who consider composition a service course, teaching students to write but not introducing them to any particular academic field. Administrators are careful that a service course doesn't presume to do the work of courses in the disciplines.

At this point, I will ask the obvious question: Is composition a discipline? From an institutional or a departmental perspective, composition is not a discipline. It is,

instead, a skills course, not, like those in the disciplines, organized around content. However, the professionalization of composition and rhetoric, suggests that within the field, composition is considered a discipline. If composition is a discipline, though, why do composition texts not appear in composition anthologies? Why, in fact, is the content of composition courses not composition? Are texts produced outside a discipline regularly taught in any other university course? Does this peculiarity constitute interdisciplinarity? No, although it does create confusion for students, who enter composition classes thinking that they are in English, and for professors, like me, who do not have a Ph.D. in composition and rhetoric but do have interdisciplinary graduate training.

Our composition program has not resolved this confusion. At SCSU, although they have some choice, part-time composition instructors must use one or another anthology. Full-time faculty is not restricted to anthologies but most use them anyway. Some of us, myself included, have created composition courses organized around an idea or set of ideas, concluding after a few semesters teaching with *Rereading America* and *Ways of Reading* that students need more coherent content than these anthologies provide, exposure to primary texts as well as secondary texts and, to help them organize the ideas they were confronting, some disciplinary knowledge. To improve as writers, we thought, students needed to be accumulating knowledge about something in particular throughout the semester. The first course that I taught without an anthology was organized around the idea of survival. I included Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Dora* on the syllabus, a choice of reading material that might have led some critics to consider my course psychology rather than composition. Although I was teaching

students something about psychology, specifically Freud's perspective on survival, I did not consider myself teaching psychology. But was I teaching composition? Courses like mine on survival, what we refer to as thematic composition courses, may not be the answer to the question of content in composition; however, they are a step in that direction.

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I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Programmatic Interdisciplinarity

Author(s): Carra Leah Hood

Corporate Source: CCCC Conference, Chicago IL, March 2002

Publication Date: March 23, 2002

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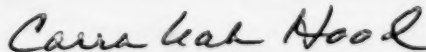
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